

The House of Dead Scents: Vida Ognjenović's Linguistic Odorarium

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As I was writing this paper, Vida Ognjenović was actively participating in the historical events that brought an end to the tyrannical regime in Yugoslavia. In her significant political engagement, she took part in writing a new page in history. Thus, if we view the title of her novel *The House of Dead Scents* as a metaphor for the Yugoslavia of the era before October 2000, we can say that Ognjenović has, in her political engagement, recreated that metaphor and enlivened it with the “fresh scents” of democracy. Furthermore, her story of dead scents, which offers itself to multiple interpretations, can also be called “a book of living language.”

This novel, which depicts a small town somewhere in Vojvodina, full of “the constraints of its provincial orbit,”¹ is a story about a collector of rare bottles and scents. The plot meanders around Gedeon Volni, the protagonist, whose fervor in an odd collecting endeavor attracts numerous other characters in the novel. When he dies, to the surprise of the reader and the characters in the book alike, the scents from the precious collection disappear, vanishing together with their passionate collector. In his search for immortality, Gedeon Volni seemingly loses the battle. It was his ardent spirit that preserved his collection. Ognjenović's talent, which produced the most imaginative, original and lively linguistic expressions, the subject of this paper, is similar to Gedeon's zeal, which sustained the life of the scents.

As soon as we enter *The House of Dead Scents* we are enveloped and intrigued by a multitude of vibrant words, springing from the pages of this novel as new creations that we have not encountered before. Many of them are somehow familiar, since we can discern their meaning, but at the same time they are new, sprightly, never heard before, and ready to be adopted. Their freshness and alacrity match Virginia Woolf's descriptions of words in her novel *The Waves*:

¹ Vida Ognjenović, *Kuća mrtvih mirisa* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1996), 5.

They flick their tails right and left as I speak them. ... They wag their tails, they flick their tails; they move through the air in flocks, now this way, now that way, moving all together, now dividing, now coming together.²

With such linguistic creativity and playfulness, the author opens a house to us that is also a dictionary of enriched and highly innovative Serbian, so the readers acquire another role and become learners of new words in their native language.

Starting with the premise of the Sapir/Whorfian hypothesis of language relativity and the application of a metalinguistic approach to literary criticism, which ascertain a correlation between language and thought patterns, Richard Ohman states the following about the literary and stylistic choices authors make:

These choices are important, for they are the critic's key to a writer's mode of experience. They show what sort of place the world is for him, what parts of it are significant or trivial. They show how he thinks, how he comes to know, how he imposes order on the ephemeral pandemonium of experience.³

If we are to judge Ognjenović's world by her literary expression we can undoubtedly state that it is a world of self-confidence, originality, innovation, playfulness and an astonishing breadth of the most versatile lexical knowledge. Such is her language: self-assured in its boldness to invent new expressions, to play with them, vary them, and, at times, even shock her literary audience with a daring originality.

Let us now closely examine Ognjenović's language in *The House of Dead Scents*. First of all, there is a whole category of new, coined words that the author skillfully intertwines and weaves into her text. Here are some examples: *nalutati*, *paruštine*, *boculjak*, *cmoljavo flašiče*, *tugomir*, *pomilušiti*, *odorarijum*, *odorolog*, *odorologovica*, *odorče*, *starčićak*, *starušan*, *staruh*, *zakukaveljiti*, *dobonjati*. These words are derived and composed from their standard counterparts while the metamorphoses they underwent vary from acquiring new prefixes (*nalutati*), changing the root slightly (*zakukaveljiti*), and being transformed into novel diminutive or augmentative forms (*boculjak*, *paruštine*) to being innovatively coined out of two words (*tugomir*).

² Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt, 1959), 20–21.

³ Richard Ohman, "Prolegomena to the Analysis of Style," in *Essays on the Language of Literature*, ed. Seymon Chatman and Samuel Levin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 408.

Another category of Ognjenović's imaginative linguistic creations is composed of words that belong to colloquial and slang vocabulary like *luperdaš*, *drndolođija*, *ženski željko*, *tandr-pinkla*, *pricapiti*, *blesograf*, *inventar-kafander*, *ćuranoid*, to name some. Here, again, the author uses her fine sense for language nuances to enrich the contemporary Serbian lexicon. In addition, expressions of derision are numerous and quite daring like *svilenguži*, *pr-dosija*, *mator dupenda*, *vrtiguzanje*. In her originality, the author is most inventive and quite pictorial, while in her playfulness she challenges her puritanical reader.

Ognjenović's expressions are generally very witty, but here are some that stand out as excellent examples of the author's humorous creativity: *mudžbenik* (from *udžbenik* and *mučiti se*), *kreketuša* (for a singer) or *sjendekati život*. However, she switches easily from her wit and humor to a broad lexicon of herbology and scents, showing an impressive command of the subject matter—obviously the product of serious research. A whole world of plants and fragrances opens up with an amazingly broad opus of the author's choice of words describing the ingredients of the collector's scents. Some of the formulas contain the following: “*đurđevak, hibiskus, jelenski mošus, ulja korijandera i lana ... masti cibetke, kastoreuma, narda, vetivera i ulja sandalovog, nerila i eukaliptusa.*”⁴ Another of the author's concoctions is described thusly: “*magnolijama, kastoreumu i cibetki dodat je biljni sastav od: cveta biturana, paprati, lista nane, gorkog badema, blage natruhe lovora, belog oleandera...*”⁵ Even though we know most of these herbs and plants, the versatility and plausibility of the formulas are not questioned by the readers, who are aware that the chemist behind these recipes is the author herself.

The virtuosity of Ognjenović's use of language is also evident in her crossing of the temporal barriers and in her literary recreation of the language of the late eighteenth century. In a textbook of zoology from 1798, Nikola Volni, one of the protagonist's ancestors, describes a sheep thus: “*To milosrdno mladunče, stvoreno po liku Božjeg Jaganjca, dragošću svojom blaži svaku ljudsku grubost i greh. ... Kad je bolest napadne valja je lečiti, kaogod i čoveka, biljem i medikamentima. Od bilja za njinu bolest dobre su: kadulja, vres, bokvica..., menta, hajdučka trava i kamomila.*”⁶ Here the author not only uses the archaic words such as *dragost*, *kaogod*, and *njina*, but also adopts a sentence structure that evokes the old language: *dragošću svojom blaži* and *valja je lečiti*, etc.

⁴ Ognjenović, 115, 127.

⁵ Ognjenović, 147.

⁶ Ognjenović, 70.

Ognjenović easily traverses the linguistic temporal line, even in contemporary language, and skillfully contrasts modes of communication that reflect the language of different generations. This is how the old professor Volni, Gedeon's father, speaks of his son: "Direktan potomak heruvinskog orguljaša iz Trnave ... čija je svirka ušla u legendu. Zbog njega su ljudi putovali saonicama kroz mećavu po dva dana da bi ga o božićnim praznicima slušali tri četvrt sata. A sad njegov izdanak, kost njegove kosti, pa da mu je svejedno ili orgulje, ili begeš."⁷ The contrast is evident when one compares the old Volni's language with the contemporary expressions in the epistolary exchanges of the two young characters from the novel: "Vladislave Letiću, imaš jedan sasvim neopravdan izostanak, šta je to s tobom, prebacuje mu Milan u jednom pismu. ... Ne ajmeči povazan, Ličanine, ajme, vajme, nisam ti ja stalni dopisnik za tvoje zidne novine, odgovara mu Letić."⁸ With such a shift from one register of formality to another, Ognjenović portrays her characters vividly, while her skillful usage of linguistic nuances almost effortlessly accomplishes the writer's task of characterization.

Furthermore, the author's masterful handling of language is presented in her dialogues, not surprisingly a forte of this acclaimed playwright. Though not given in the dialogue format, the text is replete with lively, conversational exchanges. The language of the dialogues is so real that the reader feels as if he is in the midst of those animated verbal duels. This is an excerpt from one of the dialogues, interspersed with the comments of the omniscient narrator:

Ha, znao sam da će to da pita, zasijao je profesor od zadovoljstva...
Šta koliko milimetara, hteo bi da zna. Ne, dragi moj gospodine, niks,
niks... To je dragoviću moj najvažnije otkriće maestra Paržika ...
Imate li vi uopšte apsolutni sluh? Ako nemate sve je zabadava. ...
Jesus Christ, mrmljao je zadivljeni Tomas.... Ne dam! Nisu za-
služili.... I sad su došli kod mene da im ja dam certifikat. Ne dam!⁹

Here, an effective use of dramatic elements further adds to the quality of Ognjenović's narrative.

Since this paper is meant to elucidate the author's innovative and effective use of the Serbian language, let us also examine how the novel's translation into English matches its Serbian original. Firstly, it is obvious that the task of translating Ognjenović's work is quite a challenge, specifically because of her rich and imaginative language. Dealing with such an innovative

⁷ Ognjenović, 158–59.

⁸ Ognjenović, 196.

⁹ Ognjenović, 151–53.

and original corpus, the author's translator is almost doomed, even before undertaking this difficult task, to be what the Italian saying professes: *traduttore—traditore* (the translator is a traitor).

The House of Dead Scents was translated into English by Mirka Janković, whose overall rendition of the original is quite good. She was able to convey to the English readers the meaning of the text as a whole. Her sentence structure follows the natural syntactic ordering of an English sentence, but at the same time her translation encompasses certain dimensions of Serbian syntax. Here is a sentence in which the translator skillfully kept the flow of the Serbian sentence, which is, unlike a basic, succinct English sentence, quite long:

There are people who naturally grow into a place they have lived in for generations yet they nevertheless bear a permanent grudge against it because, hang it, its needs are lesser than their capabilities, whilst in point of fact they are bonded to it precisely by that rhetorically ornate story about having grown out of it.¹⁰

But since “the devil is in details,” the translator's task was the most challenging exactly where Ognjenović is at her best, with her lexical inventiveness and her refined sense for linguistic nuances. Janković has rather successfully translated some of the author's new creations while, unfortunately, there are many newly coined words whose renditions were less felicitous. These are some of the examples where the translator found a suitable English counterpart: *croak* (*kreketuša*), *fly about* (*letati*), *silk-arsed* (*svilenguži*), or *turkeyoid* (*ćuranoid*), *odorologist* (*odorolog*), *odorologistess* (*odorologovica*), *odorlet* (*odorče*). With these expressions she simply and effectively transposed the Serbian words into new English expressions. She was also quite successful in finding equivalent variations for Ognjenović's wealth of expressions for an old man. The original terms *starčićak*, *stariša*, *starušan* and *staruh* were translated as *oldster*, *grey hairs*, *old timer*, and *old fellow*. However, even with her ability to come up with the approximations, the translator could not transfer the original with variations of the same root, thus the translation lacks in the effectiveness of alliteration. A similar example is the translation of the word *staroderi*, which was preceded in the original by *blesojderi*. While the translator found the acceptable English words *oldskin-flayers* and *nincompoops* for her rendition, they do not rhyme as do the Serbian words. Also, Ognjenović's wit is lost in translation, which shows how hard it is to match

¹⁰ Vida Ognjenović, *The House of Dead Scents*, trans. Mirka Janković (Belgrade: Dereta, 1998), 7.

her inventiveness. When we look at the translation of “nek idu drugi u druguzicu” as “let all the others go to blazes,” we cannot but feel sorry for what the English reader is missing. Similar examples are *ladies’ man* for *ženski željko*, *vexbook* for *mudžbenik*, *screech* for both *škripecanje* and *ciguljanje*, *my dear friend* for *dragoviću moj* or *brush face* for *pomilušiti*. In all of these examples, English readers are able to grasp the basic meaning of the original but not experience the joy of reading and learning new and innovative words and expressions. However, in order to be fair to the translator, we need to point out in this analysis that the shown discrepancies between the original and its rendition are primarily a result of Ognjenović’s lexical virtuosity, not the translator’s incompetence.

This comparative analysis of the original and its translation shows that it is almost impossible to mimic the brilliance of the original. This only supports the validity of the hypothesis of language relativity and the interdependence of language and thought, according to which human expressions represent unique reflections of their specific intellectual processes. Furthermore, we cannot only postulate that the language we use is influenced by our thought patterns and *vice versa*, but also that language, one of the most volatile and ever changing human characteristics, is also affecting the world around us. The internal qualities of language and thought can profoundly influence the external reality. Thus, as Gedeon’s rare collection has affected the lives and minds of those who came in contact with him, Vida Ognjenović’s lexical virtuosity has influenced, changed, and enriched the Serbian language, as well as her reading public, with a unique collection of her linguistic innovations. We are now left to anticipate the new scents in Ognjenović’s literary “odorarium.”